

My President, Right or Wrong

On the catastrophic fallibility of U.S. presidents and their men

Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers

By Daniel Ellsberg
Viking Penguin, 2002

Commenting on public disclosure of *The Pentagon Papers*, the official government history which documents the pervasive lying and misjudgement that characterized the United States' conduct of its war against Vietnam, White House chief-of-staff R.J. Haldeman paraphrased a colleague's assessment of the political implications:

"To the ordinary guy, all this is a bunch of gobbledygook. But out of the gobbledygook comes a very clear thing: You can't trust the government; you can't believe what they say; and you can't rely on their judgement. And the implicit infallibility of presidents, which has been an accepted thing in America, is badly hurt by this, because it shows that people do things the president wants to do even though it's wrong, and the president can be wrong."

This excerpt from the Watergate tapes, whose evidence of presidential misconduct contributed to Nixon's downfall, is quoted in a recent book by Daniel Ellsberg, the former government official who leaked *The Pentagon Papers* to the press in 1971.

The official whose assessment was paraphrased by Nixon's chief-of-staff was Donald Rumsfeld who, as Secretary of Defense, is among those chiefly responsible for the systematic lying and misjudgement that pervades the current foreign policy of the United States.

"I feel that I'm waking up to the world I left 30 years ago," noted Ellsberg in an interview during the run-up to the unprovoked war of aggression against Iraq in the spring of 2003.

The lessons drawn by the two men from the Vietnam War thus appear to have been very different. For Rumsfeld, the path to peace has been the road not taken. By distinct contrast, Ellsberg has spent the intervening years working for nuclear disarmament and a less destructive U.S. foreign policy.

His book, *Secrets*, provides an invaluable insider's account of national policy-making before and during the Vietnam War, including the thought processes of the people who made it. Ellsberg was himself among them. A true-believer in the anti-communist crusade, he participated at the highest level in the planning and conduct of the Vietnam War's initial stages— despite an early conviction that it was doomed to failure. His analysis of his and other officials' devoted service to a clearly disastrous policy is one of the fundamental problems addressed in the book:

"An entire generation of Vietnam-era insiders had become just as disillusioned as I with a war they saw as hopeless and interminable. . . . By 1968, if not earlier, they all wanted, as I did, to see us out of this war. Indeed, this poses a question that I have worked at understanding ever since: How could it be,

under these circumstances, that after the massive disillusionment of the Tet Offensive in early 1968, the war still had seven years to go?"

In presenting at least a partial answer to that question, *Secrets* provides an edifying tale of a cold warrior's moral/intellectual awakening, and the worrying implications of his subsequent "deviant behaviour" for all those around him—family, friends and colleagues. Among other things, he details the psychological, social, economic and professional pressures on a government official in his predicament, and thereby helps to explain why most individuals in similar situations do not choose to seek the information he chose to seek or think the thoughts he dared to think.

This is tragically reflected in the postures of Ellsberg's colleagues at the government-sponsored think tank, the Rand Corporation, most of whom were also opposed to the war—but only in private. A published letter to the editor of the *New York Times* prior to release of *The Pentagon Papers*, sharply criticizing the war and signed by several of his colleagues, did not find favour with most others:

"With two or three exceptions, every one of them was negative, often very hostile, angry, reproachful, disdainful, accusatory. Moreover—this is what most surprised me, what I was most unprepared for—hardly one took issue with the substance of our letter or even addressed it. . . .

""[One said that] while you may feel strongly enough to lay your own jobs on the line, you do not have the right to lay mine there as well.' . . . [Another] gestured around his well-furnished two-story living room and said, 'Dan, if I was willing to give up all this, if I was willing to renege on my divorce agreement from my earlier marriage, on my commitment to send my son to [the exclusive boarding school] Groton, if I was willing to sell my house and use the money to buy a Colonel Sanders franchise, I would have signed that letter'."

Thus it would appear that, for the love of Groton and fear of fried chicken, a monstrous international crime was permitted to continue unopposed by those who most effectively might have done so. "I must say that my hopes of inspiring some insiders to follow my example didn't seem to meet with much success," Ellsberg has noted in a commentary on the events described in the book.

As for the war and its prosecution, there is little in *Secrets* that was not already known or could be inferred. But Ellsberg's insider status and the insight it provided confers an authority that is difficult to dismiss (although that will surely not prevent historical revisionists from trying).

There are also some interesting new items of information and revealing anecdotes. Among the latter is a first-hand account of how Robert McNamara, the Secretary of Defense chiefly responsible for administering the Vietnam War under presidents Kennedy and Johnson, returned from a fact-finding mission to Vietnam with the expressed conviction that the situation was hopeless. Then, alighting from his airplane to meet the waiting press, McNamara proceeded to describe with great enthusiasm the enormous progress being made by the U.S. and its puppet regime.

This exercise in blatant mendacity was hardly an isolated incident. As Ellsberg repeatedly emphasizes, it was part of a systematic policy of deceit intended primarily to conceal the truth from the people of the United States and its allies.

That policy remains the same under the Bush government, as Ellsberg has pointed out in interviews prior to the war against Iraq. For example:

"This government, as in the case of Vietnam, is lying us into a war. Like Vietnam, it's a reckless, unnecessary war, where the risks greatly outweigh any possible benefits. . . .

"Does that mean I think these people are insane? No, because something I'm really aware of— from *The Pentagon Papers* and from Vietnam— is that people who are by every standard very intelligent, very patriotic, generally conscientious, even very decent people by nearly every standard, are capable of making decisions. . . that are stupid, reckless, wildly inattentive to the human consequences. It seems almost savage, their willingness to see other humans die in order to keep themselves in office, or to avoid some other kind of humiliation. That's the way humans are, especially humans in power.

"And we, the other humans, the ones who let them get there, we have the human proclivity to let them get away with it, and to go on with it in our name, and to let them support it. . . ."

These observations raise the question of whether the intended purpose of Ellsberg's book— to curb the abuse of power by exposing the truth about it, and to encourage others to do likewise— will ever be fulfilled.

During the run-up to the latest madness, for example, a number of revealing truths were exposed— that the U.S. government's principal source from within Iraq reported that essentially all weapons of mass destruction (the stated pretext for the war) had been disposed of long ago, that the CIA concluded that Iraq's dictator did not pose any threat unless he were attacked, that no links to the al-Qaueda terror organization had been found, etc. But none of that seemed to make any difference. All that the president and his men needed to do was to lie a little louder, and the enthusiastic support of The Great American People was ensured.

Of course, that in no way diminishes the value of Ellsberg's anti-war efforts or his writings. But it is alarming that they appear to have so little effect.

Meanwhile, Donald Rumsfeld and others like him remain in power, demonstrating nearly every day that, "You can't trust the government; you can't believe what they say; and you can't rely on their judgement," and that, "people do things the president wants to do even though it's wrong."

* * * * *

Al Burke is editor of Nordic News Network and co-ordinator of the Environmental Conference on Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. For a concise summary of The Pentagon Papers and information on related issues, see "Ethical, Legal & Policy Issues" at: <http://www.nnn.se/vietnam/environ.htm>

For a sample chapter and other information related to Daniel Ellsberg's Secrets, see: <http://www.ellsberg.net>